



Democratization

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A private sphere: democracy in a digital age

Mengyao Yuan

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to candidates in 2012 is remarkably different to 1968. The 1970s would see the first successful application of direct mail, whilst 2008 would see the extensive use of the internet as a fundraising tool, information provider, and source of networking to generate people on the ground. The Obama team would prove adept at utilizing this new technology, as they are so far proving in 2012 with the complex use of social networking sites.

Chapter 7 offers a very useful insight into the population changes that are occurring in the USA. The next 40 years will see more people speaking Spanish in the USA than English. One profound impact of this is the growing Latino vote – whoever succeeds in attracting this vote may find it the key to electoral success in the future, particularly as a significant percentage live in swing states.

A serious student of American elections would find little that is new in this book. Indeed, if I have one criticism of the book it would be that it is too short at 147 pages and would benefit from a deeper level of analysis. But the thematic approach centred on Grant Park does allow a useful snapshot to be taken of how American elections have changed significantly since 1968. As such, it provides a helpful introduction to anyone new to the process. There is nothing in the world like an American presidential election, and this book reminds us again of how intriguing, and dumbfounding, they can be, combining both the best and the worst that democracy has to offer.

Andrew Moran

London Metropolitan University

Email: a.moran@londonmet.ac.uk

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A private sphere: democracy in a digital age, by Zizi A. Papacharissi, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010, 200 pp., index, bibliography, £14.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-7456-4525-4

This book seeks to answer how online digital media shapes, and in turn, how it is shaped by contemporary democracy. By observing how new technologies are deeply embedded in individuals' routines, how new media environments change the logic of civic engagement, and by analysing the surrounding concepts and debates, Papacharissi provides thoughtful and illuminating answers in *A Private Sphere*.

To understand this defining question, we must first define democracy. Papacharissi suggests that democracy is more than a political system of government; it combines personal trajectories of success and failure in everyday life through a common shared system of decision-making. People discuss politics among,

and together with, other things, and these practices help them connect politics to essential parts of their daily lives. Taking this into account, democracy is a way of resolving the individual's relationship to the public and the private. However, Papacharissi suggests that online technologies reshape contemporary democracy, by blurring and redefining the borders of public and private.

So, the second issue is what is unique in digital media and how does this influence the public and private spheres and contemporary democracy? According to Papacharissi, the democratic merit of new technology and digital media is convergence, which not only refers to the overlap and combination of multimedia content, but also to trends and practices with and beyond technology: 'In the democratic sphere of interaction, convergence simultaneously melds and blurs traditional boundaries among media, and among audiences of different media, audiences and publics, citizens and consumers, consumers and producers' (p. 52). New technologies help individuals to expand the scope of their social activity, modify the depth of social networks, enable people to communicate movably, and rearrange boundaries between public and private spaces. In the aspect of practice, new technologies make social organization become more fluid and elusive. As architecture, technology is integrated into daily life, it presents the environment within which people build their thoughts and take actions. In this convergent sphere of experiences, individuals' activities combine the social, commercial, political, and cultural, but do not define them in isolation.

The next question is what does citizenship mean in such a convergent digital media? After an understanding of the historical progression of citizenship and the illustration of modernity and capitalism, Papacharissi argues that it is difficult to capture 'citizenship'; a perfect concept has never existed, however, we can understand it as a 'general concept employed to communicate patterns of exclusion, inclusion, erosion of past practice, withdrawal from civic engagement, and adjust of citizenship to historically sensitive conditions' (p. 89). So citizenship can be understood as historical reflection of civic trends and the connections that these civic trends bear to democracy. In this sense, 'citizenship' can be used as a model to describe the role of the citizen in a converged digital environment.

Papacharissi suggests that in this convergent environment, we can describe contemporary citizen or citizenship from the following aspects: citizen consumer, cultural citizenship, cosmopolite, monitorial citizen and digital citizen. Consumption has become ingrained in people's daily life and as a form of expressing political identity; it intertwined with civic practices and changed civic obligations. Cultural citizenship relates citizen with specific contexts, as it pertains to the employment of culture, popular, national, or consumer, for claims to citizenship and for expression and fulfillment of civic needs. Referring to the global nature of civic affairs in the present, global citizens have to reconcile conflicting discourses of the global and local into hybrid cultures. Another civic territory can be described as the monitorial citizen, which concerns civic activity and engagement. Monitorial citizens are capable of action, but they are also calculative of the risks associated with political action within the convergence of more

information. Digital citizenship is civic responsibility enabled by digital technologies. As a civic agent, digital citizenship is refined through individual use of digital media, which is about the equality of access, the use of online political resources, the offline effects of online discussion, and new forms of engagement. This descriptive matrix provides a complex picture of the contemporary citizen, which is liquid and flexible, and which cannot be captured by a single property. New technologies provide many possibilities, but they do not guarantee a better democracy.

Under the liquid and flexible circumstances, does the public sphere model still fit contemporary citizenship, or should we use a new metaphor to capture it? Papacharissi suggests that online technologies afford us public and private spaces, rather than a public sphere; spaces presented by convergent technologies are hybrid public and private spaces: 'New technologies create a new civic vernacular for individuals, allowing an actualization of civic identity in tropes distinct from the deliberate model of the public sphere' (p. 130). Papacharissi locates this new civic vernacular in the private sphere, where the citizen is alone, but not lonely or isolated. They are connected, discussing political issues related to personalized content. The values of autonomy, control, reflection, and self-expression are at the centre of late modern democracy, therefore the personalized content provided by online media fits well with citizens' private sphere, where self remains the point of reference. We can observe five new civic habits in the digital age, which refer to individuals' identities in the digital environment, the political use of blog, YouTube, social media, and online activism.

Papacharissi concludes that the private sphere is the result of the combined effect of the economic, cultural, social, political, and technological context, which 'affords the autonomy, control and expressive capabilities of that enable dissent, it effectively reconciles the personal with the political in a way that enables connection with like-minded individuals. The private sphere, as metaphor, describes and explains the mechanisms for civic connection in contemporary democracies' (p. 167).

Papacharissi's book provides an alternative and insightful perspective with which to examine democracy in the digital age. Influenced by new technology, the border between the public and private space has been blurred and redefined. Reexamining the applicability of the private sphere model in debate with earlier scholars, and analysing the political use of digital media, this work will be very helpful for future research of the digital environment and democracy. However, this book is about a metaphor but not the political practices in the real world, it is a theory about logic and concept but not about real conflicts and relations. This model implies an optimistic potential of new democracy; however, the real political practices will be much more complex and diverse than this model can present. The context in which the new technologies converge is crucial to our understanding, as technology can only provide opportunities for individuals to express themselves, yet what they express and the implications of their expression vary due to context. The history and political environment of a country, censorship,

and many other particular factors will reshape the relationship between technologies and citizens. Testing this model in empirical research will help us to examine its importance.

Mengyao Yuan

University of Edinburgh

Email: M.Yuan-2@sms.ed.ac.uk

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